

EXTENSIONS OF REMARKS

THE HOMEOWNERS EMERGENCY MORTGAGE ASSISTANCE ACT

HON. LUIS V. GUTIERREZ

OF ILLINOIS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, October 8, 1998

Mr. GUTIERREZ. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to introduce legislation that will restore the dream of homeownership to middle- and low-income families.

Mr. Speaker, the sight is all too familiar in urban and rural America: boarded-up homes, abandoned lots, blighted communities. These sights demonstrate that the dream of homeownership is fleeting for some and that these dreams can become nightmares when financial hardship occurs. But what often goes unspoken in discussing this issue is the fact that some of these abandoned properties were purchased under Federal mortgage programs intended to help middle- and low-income Americans. This leads us to ask: what improvements can we make to Federal mortgage assistance programs so that people can keep their homes and live the American dream?

This is the goal of my legislation, the Homeowners Emergency Mortgage Assistance Act. This bill makes needed changes in the way the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) administers its mortgage guarantee program and will keep the dream of homeownership alive for people facing temporary financial difficulties. Under the bill, property owners who fail to pay their mortgage for two months, due to no fault of their own, would not be subject to immediate foreclosure. Often, homeowners cannot honor their mortgage payments because of factors beyond their control. For example, the FHA does not require inspections on homes it guarantees. After a home is purchased, serious structural dilapidation may be uncovered. In such cases, the home may be falling apart and the homeowner will not be able to both repair the damage and pay their mortgage. The home becomes unlivable and is foreclosed. This further blights the neighboring areas and ends the homeowner's dream.

To resolve this unfortunate situation, my bill would provide temporary mortgage assistance to homeowners in need for a period of no longer than 36 months. The assistance would have to be paid back to the FHA and would only be offered if FHA officials deem that the homeowner would be able to honor their mortgage obligations and pay back the emergency assistance after this time period.

Saving people's homes in this manner is a win-win proposition for the government, for the homeowners, the lenders and for the adjacent communities. As you know, the FHA guarantees 100 percent of mortgage loans provided by private lenders to middle- and low-income families under the National Housing Act. Yes, 100 percent. When a home is foreclosed, the FHA has to pay the lender the entire cost of the mortgage. As you can imagine, this is tremendously costly. It can also be avoided in many cases.

In such cases, temporary assistance can make all the difference for homeowners, allowing homeowners to pay for repairs and honor their mortgages. The FHA saves money because the temporary assistance they provide is far less costly than paying the full cost of the mortgage. In addition, the temporary assistance must be paid back thus recouping additional taxpayers' dollars. The lenders are equally satisfied because they are receiving their monthly assessments. And the community is preserved from blight that would otherwise reduce property values throughout the area. The Homeowners Emergency Mortgage Assistance Act is a solution that restores the dream of homeownership for everyone concerned.

The program has also been "battle-tested." My legislation is based on a very successful program in Pennsylvania. More than 24,000 Pennsylvania families faced with possible foreclosure have received help from the state's Homeowners Emergency Mortgage Assistance Program (HEMAP). Pennsylvania's Republican Governor Tom Ridge and Democratic leaders throughout the state have hailed the program as a cost-efficient means to prevent homelessness. In Pennsylvania, 90 percent of assistance payments have been paid back and only eight percent of HEMAP loans have resulted in foreclosure. This record of success should be duplicated at the Federal level.

Saving homes, money and neighborhoods is what government programs should work to achieve. The Homeowners Emergency Mortgage Assistance Act will accomplish these vital goals. I urge my colleagues to co-sponsor this legislation and work with me to maintain the dream of homeownership for middle- and low-income Americans.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN CENTRAL ASIA

HON. CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH

OF NEW JERSEY

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, October 8, 1998

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, this Congress has focused much needed attention on U.S. foreign policy with respect to the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion and the right to practice one's personal faith. As Co-Chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe and for the benefit of my colleagues, I would like to direct the attention of this House to the Department of State's "OSCE Implementation Report 1998" and, more specifically, the sections concerning religious freedom issues.

In Central Asia, the recognition of religious liberty has been mixed. The Constitution and laws of the Kyrgyz Republic provide for the right of all citizens to choose and practice their own religion. However, these rights are not being effectively protected in practice. In December 1996, the President issued a decree creating new legal obstacles for registering

church congregations. In 1997, a new law failed to pass the parliament that would have severely limited religious liberties. Similarly, in its seventh year of independence, Kazakhstani citizens enjoy basic religious rights, although the government is inclined to regulate the activities of foreign religious associations. Current law in Turkmenistan requires 500 signatures before registration is granted and in Uzbekistan, similar restrictions apply to religious groups.

In Eastern Europe, although there are signs of progress, there are some countries that could be potential trouble spots. In 1997, Russia enacted a potentially discriminatory law concerning religion which imposes new restrictions on the establishment of new religious organizations. In Moldova, there is currently in force a 1992 law on religion that contains some restrictions to religious liberty and could inhibit the activities of some religions, although these provisions are reportedly not being enforced. In Ukraine, despite the 1991 law which has positive provisions, a 1993 amendment to that law has been used to restrict the activities of foreign religious organizations. Foreign religious workers have encountered resistance from Ukrainian local officials when trying to renew visas or seeking the use of public buildings for religious services. These kinds of government activities may violate commitments found in the Helsinki Final Act, Basket III, Section 1d, in which the participating states confirm that religious faiths can have contacts and meetings among themselves.

The focus of the report on the Baltic States is Latvia where freedom of religion is constitutionally well established. Under the 1995 Law on Religious Organizations, the Government of Latvia does not require religious groups to register. However, there is incentive to do so in that certain rights and privileges will be afforded to them only if they register. The Justice Ministry has registered some 800 congregations under this law but still denies registered status to Jehovah's Witnesses, the Latvian Free Orthodox Church, the Church of Christ Scientist, and the Rock of Salvation Church. With respect to foreign missionaries, they are allowed to hold meetings and proselytize only if Latvian religious organizations invite them. In particular the Jehovah's Witnesses have encountered severe obstacles under the current Latvian legal framework. As one of the privileges afforded to registered religious organizations, Latvian law allows for religious education to be provided to students in public schools on a voluntary basis by representatives of registered faiths. Elsewhere in the Baltics, Estonia has yet to clarify the implementation of a new visa law enacted in January which could potentially restrict residency of foreign missionaries to ninety days during any six month period. The Baltics merit a close watch, despite some favorable reports.

In the Caucasus, both Azerbaijan and Armenia have strict laws prohibiting foreigners from proselytizing. While Azerbaijan does respect "domestic" faiths, placing no restrictions on them, many foreign groups have reported harassment. The Ministry of Justice has denied

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